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C O N F I D E N T I A L ALGIERS 000623

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TAGS: [PBTS](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [WI](#) [MO](#) [AG](#)  
SUBJECT: POLISARIO "AMBASSADOR" COMMENTS ON NEGOTIATING  
WITH MOROCCO

Classified By: Ambassador Richard W. Erdman, Reason 1.4 (b) (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Polisario "Ambassador" to Algeria Mohammed Beissat discussed his views on possible negotiations with Morocco over King Mohammed VI's autonomy plan in a prolonged April 1 conversation with DCM and Pol/Econ Chief. Reviewing the history of Polisario-Moroccan direct negotiations since 1979, Beissat expressed his skepticism about Moroccan intentions, but he did not rule out a new round of talks "provided the framework was appropriate." DCM urged that the Polisario not pass up the opportunity to negotiate, and pressed Beissat on the possibility of a referendum on autonomy. Beissat said somewhat ambiguously he thought a referendum might be acceptable if the Sahrawis in Tindouf were included in the vote. It was not clear if he was referring to an "autonomy-only" referendum. On a more negative note, he dismissed King Mohammed as a "weak" leader who was unlikely to be able to make peace. In response to DCM's comment that the international community was not likely to pressure Morocco, Beissat said he thought the real pressure on Morocco would come from the young generation of Sahrawis inside the Western Sahara, who, he asserted, had rejected Moroccan attempts to impose a Moroccan identity on them. Time was not on Morocco's side, he argued. End summary.

DISAPPOINTING HISTORY OF NEGOTIATIONS WITH MOROCCO

2. (C) In a lengthy conversation April 1, Polisario "Ambassador" to Algeria Mohammed Beissat, accompanied by visiting Polisario Interests Section chief in Australia Kamel Al-Fadil, discussed with DCM and Pol/Econ Chief the possibility of Polisario engaging in a new round of direct negotiations with Morocco over King Mohammed VI's autonomy plan. DCM urged that Polisario not miss the opportunity to negotiate once the Moroccan side was ready. Beissat did not dismiss the possibility of negotiations, but said their decision would depend on finding the appropriate "framework" under UN auspices.

3. (C) Sketching in some detail the history of Polisario-Moroccan direct talks, Beissat said they went back to three-way talks including Mauritania held under AU auspices in 1979. (Note: We do not vouch for the historical accuracy of Beissat's presentation, which was clearly that of an informed but highly partisan interlocutor.) When Morocco walked out of those talks, Mauritania dropped its claim to

the southern portion of the Western Sahara and withdrew from the conflict. A senior Polisario delegation next held direct negotiations with King Hassan II in 1988, which made some progress toward a ceasefire and generated the momentum that allowed Morocco and Algeria to resume diplomatic relations. Hassan had offered autonomy in 1988, suggesting all he needed was to maintain Morocco's flag, stamps, and currency, but Polisario had insisted on a referendum that would include independence as a possible outcome, a position subsequently accepted by Hassan and which formed the basis for the ceasefire and the establishment of MINURSO.

14. (C) Beissat described a 1996 session with then Crown Prince Mohammed and Minister of Interior Basri as very disappointing, since Mohammed had refused to listen to a Polisario presentation on independence, reportedly saying that was not within his instructions from his father. The appointment of James Baker as the UNSYG's personal representative, the Houston talks, and Hassan's death had followed. Beissat reiterated Polisario frustration over Morocco's rejection of the Baker Plan, noting that Baker had intentionally adjusted the voter list and duration of the transitional period in order to address Moroccan concerns, and yet Morocco had still walked away from the concept of a referendum, which had been the basis of the entire diplomatic process since the 1991 ceasefire. This experience made the Polisario very skeptical of the utility of negotiating with Morocco since even if an agreement were reached, the Moroccans could simply change their minds and the international community would not impose any penalty on them. Beissat praised Baker as a statesman of the first order, and said the Polisario doubted any other UN representative could be found who would have Baker's stature.

#### NO POLISARIO OBJECTION TO TERMINATING MINURSO

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15. (C) DCM noted that both Morocco and Algeria had expressed serious concern about the possibility that MINURSO's mission could be terminated by the Security Council. Beissat said Polisario saw little point to extending MINURSO since it manifestly could not carry out its intended purpose of preparing the ground for a referendum. Beissat agreed, however, that removing MINURSO would make the resumption of hostilities more likely, and he also agreed that MINURSO at times played a helpful role as an observer. He complained that MINURSO was powerless to protect the Sahrawi civilian population under Moroccan occupation, noting that Moroccan security forces prevented Sahrawis from visiting MINURSO headquarters in Laayoune and that the Moroccans tortured Sahrawis at a prison located only a few blocks from MINURSO headquarters. Beissat expressed understanding for Ambassador Bolton's questioning the utility of the UN continuing to fund a peacekeeping operation that could not carry out its mandate.

#### NOT RULING OUT AUTONOMY, BUT...

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16. (C) Returning to the discussion of negotiations, DCM said he would speak frankly. There was little to no chance that the international community would pressure Morocco, and rather than wait for something to change, the Polisario should prepare to engage Morocco directly and without preconditions on the basis of a Moroccan offer of autonomy. Beissat said he thought nothing good would come of King Mohammed's consultations with the Moroccan political parties, since the outcome would be to narrow rather than widen the scope of autonomy. In addition, the King appeared not to intend to include the Sahrawis in Tindouf in a referendum. Some Moroccan parties had even suggested that all Moroccan citizens must have the right to vote in a referendum. This showed Morocco's lack of seriousness, he said.

17. (C) DCM asked how Polisario would respond to a referendum on autonomy that included Tindouf residents. Beissat said the Polisario's bottom line was there had to be self-determination. If the Sahrawis voted for autonomy in a

referendum, the Polisario would accept the outcome, even though he personally would never go back to Western Sahara under Moroccan sovereignty. (Comment: It is unclear whether Beissat was speaking about a referendum in which autonomy was one option or a confirmatory referendum on autonomy.) That said, Beissat was skeptical King Mohammed was strong enough to negotiate a settlement. Recalling the Polisario's meeting with King Hassan in 1988, Beissat said they had told Hassan that he was a strong man, and Hassan had said it took a strong man to make peace as well as to make war. Beissat said the real problem with King Mohammed was that he was weak.

TIME NOT ON MOROCCO'S SIDE  
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18. (C) Beissat, perhaps trying to appeal to American interlocutors, said he was struck by television images of Jalal Talabani serving as Iraq's President while Saddam was on trial. International events were moving very fast, and what seemed impossible today could become very real tomorrow. Analyzing Morocco's internal situation, Beissat claimed occupying the Western Sahara cost Morocco about \$4 million a day. Morocco's Islamist movement was getting stronger, especially the banned Justice and Charity party, which did not accept the legitimacy of the monarchy and was not interested in Moroccan control of Western Sahara. Beissat suggested that time was not necessarily on Morocco's side. Internal pressures were building, especially from the young Sahrawi population in the Western Sahara. Despite thirty years of Moroccan efforts and pressure to Moroccanize the Sahrawis, the high school students were the ones in the streets protesting Moroccan occupation. Their parents may have accepted Moroccan control, but the young people did not.

ERDMAN